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October 20, 2008

Why was the West so keen for Kosovo to have its independence?

By Frances Maria Peacock, KosovoCompromise.com

Wednesday 8th October 2008 brought a landmark victory for Serbia in its campaign against the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo. The United Nations General Assembly voted in favour of Serbia seeking an opinion from the International Court of Justice on the legality of the declaration. Kosovo declared itself independent in February 2008 after all attempts to find a mutual agreement had supposedly failed, but the real reasons behind the declaration go beyond failed negotiations. In fact the declaration is the final product of the West's determination for Kosovo to be given its independence regardless.

Several parallels can be drawn between the negotiations at Rambouillet, aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement to the armed conflict between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Serbian forces, and the talks in Vienna, which had the purpose of resolving the Kosovo status issue. Both processes were characterised by manipulation, bias in favour of Albanians, pre-determined decisions and perhaps most importantly, a disregard for international law. There was never an intention in either case to reach a genuine agreement. Both sets of negotiations were "staged" to give the impression to the outside world that a real attempt was being made to resolve the issues peacefully.

The Rambouillet negotiations were held in early 1999, just prior to the NATO bombing of Serbia, despite a decision to launch a military attack having already been made six months earlier. The negotiations were manipulated in order to ensure that it was the Albanians who would sign the accord, not the Serbs.

During an adjournment of the negotiations, new clauses were introduced into the Accord, which Serbia would be sure to reject. These clauses would allow NATO free access not just to Kosovo, but the rest of Yugoslavia as well. Kosovo would be given a powerful constitution, enabling it to override both those of Serbia and Yugoslavia, but not the other way round. Serbia would have to finance a free market economy for Kosovo, but there was no suggestion that the economic sanctions imposed against Yugoslavia should be lifted. When the parties returned to the negotiating table, the Serbs did indeed reject the Accord, whilst the Albanians signed it, albeit with some reluctance and under Western pressure.

Prior to the commencement of talks to determine Kosovo's status, a decision was made by the West that Kosovo would be independent, and the process was thus manipulated to ensure that this would be the case. The manipulation began with the Western-dominated Contact Group placing ever-tighter restrictions upon what they



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would consider to be acceptable options, in order to force the negotiations towards independence. The eventual result was a virtual promise of independence for the Albanians regardless of the outcome of the talks. Consequently, the mediators did little to encourage the Albanians to consider alternatives to independence, despite several of these being put forward.

As the negotiations progressed, and it became increasingly obvious that the outcome had been pre-determined, the West had to give reasons to support its position. It claimed that autonomy would be unsustainable, no matter how extensive it would be, and therefore independence was the only solution. It also claimed that Serbia had lost its right to Kosovo due to Milosevic's actions, and therefore only through independence could Kosovo be truly free of Belgrade's rule.

In 1999, NATO attacked Yugoslavia without a resolution from the UN Security Council – thus it was illegal and went against international law. It also set a precedent that a military strike could be launched without a UN mandate. History was to repeat itself in 2008, when Kosovo declared its independence with complete disregard for international law and without the support of the United Nations. Throughout the negotiation process, the West conveniently ignored international law. Even though imposed independence of Kosovo without Serbia's consent would violate both the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, the West tried to get around this problem by claiming Kosovo to be a "unique case," which would not set a precedent because it could not be applied to any other situation. However, the West could not have been more wrong, as was proved to be the case in August 2008 when conflict erupted in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. The Georgian government had sent its forces into the separatist region of South Ossetia in order to regain control of the territory, but this led Russia to become increasingly concerned that civilians (many of whom are Russian citizens) were being mistreated and consequently it intervened. The conflict spread to Georgia's other separatist region of Abkhazia – both regions citing Kosovo as a precedent and using it as a basis to reassert their claims to independence, a declaration of which has subsequently been recognised only by Russia.

There is no doubt that the West must have known that it was playing a game of double standards with its support for Kosovo's independence, particularly when it stated that Georgia's territorial integrity should be upheld and its current borders respected. Both these principles had been purposely cast aside in the case of Kosovo. It is only a matter of time before further eruptions of separatism are seen in other parts of the world where such ambitions are harboured.

What though were the real reasons for the West being so determined that Kosovo should become independent, despite the KLA at one time being listed as a terrorist organisation by Washington? They cannot include Serbian treatment of Albanians in 1998/9 because the Albanians have also abused Serbs and other non-Albanians. In some cases this has also extended to fellow Albanians who have refused to support the KLA cause. Similar violations of human rights have been overlooked in countries



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closely allied to the West, such as Turkey. The reasons cannot include the notion of independence being the only solution either as proposals, which would have given Kosovo such wide autonomy that it would have been virtually independent anyway, existed. These would have allowed Kosovo to achieve its desired goal of being free from Belgrade's rule, even though it would remain within Serbian borders.

Finally, what about sustainability? If autonomy within Serbia was not considered sustainable long-term, then the present situation is certainly not sustainable. Kosovo remains in a state of limbo, unrecognised by most of the world and with a very strong international presence as the ultimate authority. Its economic prospects are dismal, with high unemployment and the youngest population in Europe. It continues to rely almost entirely on foreign aid and is unable to generate its own revenue. Yet the West chose to ignore this by creating a failed state. Even now, it has been unable to replace UNMIK and only a fraction of the personnel intended for its EULEX mission have been deployed. It is proving difficult to implement the failed Ahtisaari plan, which does not have UN Security Council backing. The state of limbo becomes ever more complicated with two international civilian presences, both of which have unclear competences, as well as the NATO peacekeeping force.

If human rights, a return to Belgrade's rule and long-term sustainability were not (as is obvious) the reasons for the West's determination to make Kosovo independent, then what were?

Firstly, Kosovo is home to the largest US military base in Europe – Camp Bondsteel. This is strategically placed to give the United States a foothold in Europe, especially the Balkans, and is geographically crucial in relation to the Middle East.

Secondly, as Serbia is a traditional Russian ally, it is in the interests of the United States to weaken Serbia in order to reduce Russia's influence in Europe, and increase its own dominance as a world superpower in the region.

Thirdly, in recent years NATO has evolved as a major political player. No longer is it the old Cold War organisation designed to protect its members if they come under attack, but has the new role of influencing political decisions and international relations. An independent Kosovo is a victory for NATO, giving it unprecedented strength within Europe and power over part of a sovereign state.

Therefore, ultimately, the independence of Kosovo has been about increasing US and NATO influence in Europe, whilst weakening the position of Russia. Rather than seeking to build upon the much-improved relations between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War, the West has taken a backward step, thus plunging its relations with Russia down to a level not seen since. The independence of Kosovo has not brought about peace and stability as was intended, but has instead encouraged separatism, set several bad precedents and threatened international legal order.



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Serbia's initiative at the UN General Assembly is an important step towards re-establishing and strengthening this legal order – regaining peace and stability, and reversing some of the bad trends. Ultimately, it will show the West that it cannot selectively apply international law to suit its own agenda. International law must be applied universally and obeyed by all.

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